

Testimony before the
House International Relations Committee

**“The Tsunami Tragedy:
How the U.S. is Responding and Providing Relief”**

January 26, 2005



**The Honorable Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress**

The Situation in Southeast Asia

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Faleomavaega, for the opportunity to testify. And thank you to Mr. Leach for the thoughtful way in which you led our delegation and for the extraordinarily productive conversations.

After touring the devastation caused by December's earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India, I hope never again to witness human devastation and physical destruction on such a wide scale. Whole sections of the Indonesian coastline were completely stripped of trees. You can see the high water mark of the tsunami, while over the hill people continue to carry on, seemingly untouched by the massive wall of water that caused such devastation to their neighbors, little more than a stone's throw away. While the magnitude of the ruin is difficult to capture in words, the images that will remain with me forever are those that speak of the deep personal loss experienced by children, families and villages: a train in Sri Lanka that was engulfed by the tsunami and flung off its tracks, killing 1200 people on board; the man, sitting blankly on the deserted rail platform, telling me without expression that he had lost his wife and children. News accounts and pictures simply cannot adequately portray the full power or extent of this natural disaster; if anything, they understate the destruction. Simply walking through the devastation was jarring; I cannot begin to imagine the impact on survivors.

Our delegation went to the region, in part, to observe and evaluate the relief activities. The quality of that relief effort was also striking, less than two weeks after the disaster. People on the ground were meeting the immediate relief requirements – something hard to imagine based on my earlier visits to the region in recent years.

USAID and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Mercy Corps, CARE, OXFAM, Save the Children and the American Red Cross understood the magnitude of the challenge and were thoroughly engaged in these critical efforts, working alongside UN organizations and local military. I want to commend the staff and volunteers of these critical NGOs for their resourcefulness and for their commitment to the victims and survivors. Without the extensive experience these groups have from their years of development and humanitarian work in the region, the international response could not have been what it was.

An important staging area for US efforts was the USS Abraham Lincoln, an aircraft carrier off the coast of Banda Aceh, from which we took our helicopter tour of Aceh. We met with Rear Admiral Doug Crowder and some of his officers in charge of our military relief efforts in this area. They clearly understood the logistics and the human dynamics involved. Everyone was impressed that the sailors there were so heavily engaged in relief operations and not just dealing with the mechanics of supporting the relief effort. They provided more volunteer manpower than could be accommodated on the ground and were always looking for other opportunities to help, as when they used the carrier group's excess desalination capacity to provide clean water -- 79,000 gallons a day -- to people on the shore who so desperately needed it. The US military's unique resources

to assess the situation and deliver aid when and where others could not made its actions an impressive demonstration of American capability and our values.

I would also make reference to the work that was done by our government's civilian employees, such as USAID, and particularly the consular staff of the State Department. I was struck by how entrepreneurial young Foreign Service Officers on vacation from other countries in Phuket, set up their own relief operations with personal cell phones, trying to aid families of people who had been affected, trying to identify victims. Seeing these relatively junior members of the Foreign Service working day in and day out in an exceedingly difficult situation, I think we can be proud of the contributions that they made under very trying circumstances.

In each country we visited, we witnessed extraordinary efforts to cope with this tragedy. While Thailand did not sustain nearly the magnitude of lost lives as Indonesia, there is still massive devastation there. The Thais are much better equipped to handle relief efforts themselves and will be able to finance most of their own reconstruction. They are also contributing to the larger relief effort by providing regional support for US aid operations, and using the Royal Thai Naval Air Base at Utapao as a staging area for international relief efforts. In Thailand, US Embassy personnel had been working around the clock, helping to identify and link the hundreds of missing or unaccounted for Americans with their families. This taxing and, at times, gruesome effort helped hundreds of American families deal with their own nightmare.

On the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka, we toured, by helicopter and bus, areas of extreme destruction on the opposite side of the island from the source of the tsunami; such was the force of the powerful waves. In Sri Lanka we were joined by Nancy Lindborg, President of Mercy Corps International, one of the key NGOs that are playing such a vital role. Mercy Corps has an extensive presence in each of the severely affected countries, having been at work for years in poverty and violence-plagued areas. Together, we toured a refugee camp and witnessed the cleanup at work.

Two of the most poignant visits were to school reconstruction sites. One school lost 250 children from a student body of 1200. We talked to a half dozen women who were teachers at the school. As they watched the cleanup, they pointed out their classrooms with student pictures still on the walls. While stricken by the loss of their students, had the wave hit while the students were in class instead of on a Sunday, most children would have been swept away, along with the teachers themselves. In another school, crews of young people from three communities in Sri Lanka were there, pulling out bricks and reusable building materials to start over. They showed not just tremendous spirit, but understanding of the need to work together to make reconstruction a positive experience.

Now, the immediate challenge is to make the transition from relief to recovery. But we must also work alongside the affected communities and our global partners to use this moment to make the world a better and safer place.

What Can the We Do?

The World's Moral Responsibility

The United States and other donor governments have a moral responsibility to follow through on our commitments of aid. Sadly, the record in the aftermath of other disasters is not encouraging. Exactly one year before this tsunami, over 40,000 people lost their lives in a devastating earthquake in Bam, Iran. \$1.1 billion dollars were pledged, but when the United Nations made an international appeal to fund recovery efforts, it received only \$17.7 million. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch roared through Central America, the worst disaster in the Western Hemisphere. After two years, the European Union had given none of \$2 billion pledged. Almost seven years after the hurricane, two-thirds of the pledged recovery money has still not been delivered.

In Aceh, the last few weeks have seen fundamentalist Islamic and al-Qaeda affiliated organizations, such as Lashkar Mujahideen, join in the relief efforts and use this tragedy to further their recruitment among the local population. Much has been made of how the sight of American soldiers with water bottles instead of guns will improve our image in the Muslim world. We must remember, just as in Bosnia ten years ago, that a failure to remain committed to the aid effort by the United States, moderate Muslims, and other mainstream forces, allows more space for extremist groups to fill. It is still too early to know how this all will play out, but it is clear that the US has a real opportunity to advance our interests here.

On a similar note, it would also be a mistake if this relief were somehow mixed up with Iraq by including it in the same supplemental appropriations bill. While Iraq continues to be a political issue that divides Congress, it is important that the tsunami aid package receive unanimous or, at least, near unanimous support. An unseemly debate over this aid package would send an unfortunate mixed message to this part of the world – much of which is Muslim and most of whom disapproved of US actions in Iraq. This vote must send the message around the world – to victims of this tragedy and to other donors - that America is united in fulfilling its obligation as a global leader. Allowing this vote to take place outside of the cauldron of the Iraq debate, will keep the focus on the aid effort and remind people that the values Americans share are values of concern and compassion.

The United States should now take the lead in making sure that pledges materialize, and in exerting leadership in the world community, so that generosity is more than a media buzz word and actually helps the hundreds of thousands of people who so desperately need it now.

Rebuilding Safer Communities

In fulfilling that commitment, we need to make sure that our long-term response doesn't recreate natural hazards that can turn into humanitarian and economic disasters. Obviously, our first priority should be to make sure people have food, shelter, clean

drinking water, and medical attention. Many are now at work making sure that this priority is being met.

Attempts to restore people's lives and communities often leave them just as vulnerable to hazards as before. While we cannot prevent natural events such as floods, mudslides, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, earthquakes, or tsunamis, we can reduce or mitigate their devastating impacts by helping communities to rebuild in safer locations, construct sturdier dwellings, and enforce sound building practices. We also have a moral obligation to do better than just putting people back in harm's way.

Preventative measures can save money as well as lives; the US Geological Survey and the World Bank estimate that in the 1990s, \$40 billion invested in preventative measures could have saved \$280 billion in disaster relief funds—an impressive 7:1 return on investment.

In some parts of Southeast Asia, stronger construction and wiser building locations were able to save lives and have made rebuilding much easier. Sadly, areas with shoddy construction, dense population centers, and inadequate public health capabilities experienced much greater devastation. For these reasons, disasters take a harder toll on poorer countries, which suffered more than half of the disaster-related deaths between 1992 and 2001. Whether the natural force at work is a tsunami, a massive earthquake like the one that flattened Bam, Iran, last August's hurricanes in Florida, or this month's mudslides in California, better construction, better location, and better enforcement can save lives and money.

Another equally important part of long term reconstruction lies in protecting and restoring natural ecosystems. United Nations disaster prevention experts have noted that natural barriers such as coral reefs and coastal forests mitigated the impact of the tsunami in some areas. In the fishing village of Thirunal Thoppu in India's Tamil Nadu state, local officials estimate that many were saved from the tsunami because of the thriving and dense mangroves that had been restored in the area. In the Indian Ocean basin, it was easy to see where natural buffers had been removed; the tsunami's devastation was magnified where coral reefs no longer protected coastal areas from massive storm surges. The bulldozing of entire stands of mangroves for shrimp farms and resorts left homes, those resorts and, indeed, entire communities vulnerable to nature's wrath. These natural coastal ecosystems are valuable not only to absorb polluted runoff and protect the health of our oceans, but also to protect and sustain coastal communities and economies.

Clearly, the world will always have natural disasters with which to contend. According to United Nations research, two billion people are expected to be especially vulnerable to floods by 2050. This is not necessarily due to an increase in the frequency or severity of natural disasters, but to growing populations, indiscriminate logging, rapid urbanization, and increasing development along coasts and in other hazardous regions.

While the extent to which human activity is responsible is debatable, these developments assure that more people are in harm's way. In our own country, seventy-five percent of people are at risk to one or more disasters, flooding being the most common. Some have argued that the current tsunami disaster should cause serious rethinking of seaside development for coastal locations, not only in Southeast Asia, but in this country as well. In the US, coastal lands are home for more than half of our population, but comprise only 13 percent of the total land area.

As I toured the devastation in Asia, I thought frequently about New Orleans. The city has always been at risk because of its low-lying location. But the risk has been increased by rising sea levels, groundwater pumping which lowers the city's elevation and various flood control and petroleum development structures that result in the destruction of protective wetlands and barrier islands. An area equal to a football field is lost every hour to coastal erosion in Louisiana, making areas like New Orleans even more vulnerable. Only a 40 mile westward shift in Hurricane Ivan's path last September would have inundated New Orleans. The result, according to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) calculations, would have been thousands of deaths, along with an estimated \$100 billion in damage to critical energy, transportation, and industrial infrastructure.

The best way to minimize damage from tsunamis and other disasters is to reduce vulnerability. We spend lots of time and energy and billions of dollars a year dealing with natural disasters after the events occur. Preparedness and mitigation are just as important as response and recovery. Disaster preparations should include everything from building disaster resistant communities, to public education about risks and responses, plans for evacuation or survival, and a thoughtful plan for short and long-term recovery.

There are already bills introduced in the House that deal with early warning systems, an important step towards preparedness. I strongly support those efforts. I hope that Congress will also ensure that part of the United States' rebuilding efforts in Southeast Asia focus on disaster preparedness and restoring and rehabilitating the coral reefs, mangroves, marshes and forests that buffer the impact of tsunamis. USAID should partner with local communities impacted by the disaster to not only construct buildings properly and in the proper places, but to build local capacity to manage growth through these design principles.

We should also be careful that our rebuilding efforts not make the problem worse in the future; for example, indiscriminate logging for lumber to reconstruct houses and shelter could contribute to even more flooding and landslides during future extreme weather events.

Promoting Peace and Security

In addition to helping rebuild safer communities, we have an unparalleled opportunity to use the tsunami response to promote peace and security in this troubled region, as well

as provide an additional measure of benefit for the affected countries. Already the stricken nations are beginning this long, arduous effort; time and again, I saw people rising to the occasion.

In the course of our journey, I was especially impressed with India. In spite of its significant losses, India responded almost immediately to assist more damaged nations. As India continues to provide responsible regional leadership, we need to look very hard at our relationship with the world's largest democracy, including whether it is not time to support India's accession to permanent membership on the UN Security Council.

There is an opportunity to upgrade our relationship with India on a whole host of shared interests and increase American leadership in South Asia. Security cooperation has seen notable progress since the terrorist attacks of September 11th and should be accelerated. The India-Pakistan peace initiative has continued with friendly and constructive talks and it appears that both sides are committed to finding a peaceful solution to the Kashmir issue. Redoubled effort from the Bush Administration towards peace will find an India ready to move forward.

We must, as well, work with India to enhance nuclear security, end-phase missile defense, and nonproliferation objectives. During our delegation, it was quite hard to explain to Indian parliamentarians and business people why the United States is again contemplating selling advanced military hardware to Pakistan, when such equipment could only be used against India, as it has in the past. This, to a country with a history of nuclear proliferation through the A.Q. Khan network that could not have occurred without the knowledge of the highest levels of government. Yet, at the same time, the US refuses to sell sophisticated equipment to India, an ally with an unblemished record on issues of proliferation and the protection of dual-use technology.

In both Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the impact of the tsunami on conflict regions also presents new opportunities for active diplomacy towards peace. In Sri Lanka, we heard numerous examples of low-level but genuine and important cooperation between the government, the separatist Tamil Tigers, and international aid agencies, working to assist stricken communities. This cooperation is just beginning to be institutionalized at higher levels and the Norwegian delegation which has been facilitating this process should be given all the support necessary to build on this momentum towards a greater peace.

In Indonesia, the dynamics of the long-standing conflict in Aceh were always just beneath the surface. Despite some mixed messages, the Indonesian government has a new opportunity to make real progress on the Aceh issue and has indicated an interest in strengthening relationships with the United States. In Aceh, we heard some encouraging words from Indonesian officials, though it does not appear that actions have matched those words. I hope that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who knows well the need to settle the Aceh issue from his days as the minister in charge of security, will seize this unique moment for a peaceful resolution in Aceh. Reports of scattered clashes between the Indonesian military (TNI) and the Free Aceh Movement

(GAM), as well as of GAM assistance in aid delivery highlight both the necessity and opportunity of a renewed diplomatic effort on the Aceh question.

In addition, for Indonesia, the experience of close cooperation with the international community is also a chance to strengthen relations between the US and the first popularly elected Indonesian government, on the basis of shared interests and improved human rights. This aid is an important first step. We might also be wise to consider renewed military cooperation with Indonesia, though not weapons sales, for the purpose of promoting professionalism and reform within the TNI and improving their ability to deal effectively and appropriately with continued security and humanitarian challenges. We are encountering a whole generation of TNI leadership that has never participated in exchange or training with their US counterparts and it shows.

Finally, Sri Lanka, like many developing countries, is suffering from the impact of the elimination of World Trade Organization textile quotas at the beginning of this year. Coming at the same time as the tsunami, this has been a double blow to the Sri Lankan economy. Senator Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) is introducing a bill, with Representatives Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) and Joe Crowley (D-NY) cosponsoring the House version, to provide preferential market access to Sri Lanka, among other countries, and I hope the committee uses its jurisdiction to advance this possibility. These trade preferences, which we regularly use as a tool to promote growth and development, would provide a boost to local economies, create jobs, and generate the resources for countries to make a greater contribution to their own reconstruction.

Remembering the Rest of the World

At the same time as we deal with the tragedy in Southeast Asia, it is important to remember those humanitarian crises and malignant threats that have been eclipsed in the public eye and in private giving, as well as those that are yet to come. New reports put the death toll in the Darfur region of Sudan at 200,000, with close to 2 million people displaced. Renewed fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo raises the specter of a return to the conflict that has killed almost 4 million people in the last decade. Lack of access to clean water and sanitation around the world kills up to 5 million people per year. Much of the aid pledged to tsunami-affected countries by multilateral development banks and other donors is reprogramming of existing aid accounts, rather than new money for this crises. As we work to rebuild lives and communities in Southeast Asia, the world cannot allow a zero-sum game with our attention and our money to diminish our moral commitment to elsewhere on the globe. The money we spend on aid to tsunami-affected countries must be new money, not merely the shifting around of dollars. It would be a shame if the impact of this disaster was that other vulnerable populations must suffer.

Returning from Southeast Asia, I am profoundly struck by the reality of what I saw and its implications for our efforts at home and abroad to provide assistance and work to mitigate against future losses to life. We all benefit by taking positive steps that provide badly needed relief, followed by long term measures that improve and sustain

communities and economies, and policies that provide greater protection from future events and strengthen global cooperation.